



## **Social media in Hotel AVA's marketing communications**

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Thesis

Degree Programme in Hotel,

Restaurant and Tourism

Management

2013



Degree programme in Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management

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<b>Title of report</b> Social media in Hotel AVA's marketing communications	<b>Number of pages and appendices</b> 52 + 2
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<p>Social media sites and applications have become extensively popular all over the world especially in the past decade. Social networking sites, creating and sharing content as well as reviewing products and services online are all based on the concept of web 2.0 and user generated content that enable the interactive communication online.</p> <p>Social media has been gaining a crucial position also in marketing communications. Its popularity is based on consumers' changed views in the aspect of marketing; a lot of information can easily be reached online at any time and by anyone. The fierce product-oriented push-marketing has been somewhat bypassed by consumer concentrated pull-marketing, often referred to as inbound marketing. The most crucial change is that the marketing message should not always be sent out to everyone despite the place and timing, but instead companies should take advantage of the social networking online and assure to be easily reachable when the customer wants to find them in order to get a solution to his/her problem.</p> <p>The purpose of this thesis is to find out how Hotel AVA, an independent hotel in Helsinki, should be present in social media as a channel of marketing communications. In the beginning of the thesis process the hotel is not present or active in social media. A qualitative research was carried out in order to find out features of the hotel's customers' behaviour in social media and to study what could be interesting content to create in social media marketing.</p> <p>The results suggest that Hotel AVA should create a social media marketing plan in order to be actively present in the online conversation and for gaining a better position in the aspect of inbound marketing. This claim is based on the data analysed about e.g. the popular platforms of social media, hotel guests' frequency in using social media, reasons to be present in social media and what is perceived as interesting content. Furthermore, it was found out that high appreciation, especially concerning hospitality industry, is given to friends', acquaintances' and other users' experiences of products and services, that is discussed in social media platforms.</p>	
<p><b>Keywords</b> Social media, marketing communications, inbound marketing</p>	

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# **1 Introduction**

During the past few years social media has gained a crucial position in marketing and marketing communications and it is increasing its status continuously. Variety of options are offered in many different channels. The popularity of social media marketing is based on the change of the core ideas behind marketing communications; the product-oriented push-marketing is starting to be old-fashioned as customer-oriented pull-marketing is gaining a more important position. Businesses have started to see marketing as concentrating on being easily found and reachable when needed and pulling customers' attention rather than pushing a selling message to everyone at all times. Consumer's role has become more active. Consequently, the importance of social media marketing has been highly increasing with its possibility to reach a lot of people's attention at the same time and creating a transparent platform for conversation that can be reached easily by everyone interested in the current topics of conversation.

The company to whom this thesis has been written is Hotel AVA, a small independent hotel in Helsinki. Hotel AVA is not visibly present in social media at the beginning of this thesis process. The main objective is to find out how the hotel could use and benefit of social media in their marketing communications, which would be the most beneficial platforms and in general how to be present in social media in a correct way for a business of its kind. The findings of this thesis are important for the hotel in order to find useful and modern ways for marketing communications as well as to keep up with the competition. Furthermore, this thesis and its findings are important for the hospitality industry as an example of using social media in a hotel's marketing communications. Moreover, the thesis is an important learning process to its writer in the end of the studies in the field of hospitality management, by studying up to date ways for marketing communications for a hotel in modern channels like those of social media.

## **1.1 Objectives and defining the subject**

The main objective of this thesis is to study and find out the most beneficial ways for Hotel AVA to use social media in their marketing communications. The starting point is that the hotel does not have almost any presence in social media created and controlled by the hotel itself. Furthermore, the hotel does not actively participate in the conversation online. The core idea of the research is to find out in which ways Hotel AVA's customers use social media, in which channels and what kind of content interests them. Based on the answers this thesis helps Hotel AVA to understand their customers' behaviour and develop the base of their social media presence in such a way that the customers could most likely and easily find them in the social web, with attracting and interesting content.

The main research questions of this thesis are:

1. In which ways are Hotel AVA's customers engaged in social media?
2. What kind of content could Hotel AVA use in their marketing communications in social media?

The subject has not been researched before and there is no existing information of Hotel AVA's customers' interests and behaviour in social media. This is why the research aims to suggest that a) Hotel AVA should develop a social media marketing plan or b) social media is not the right channel for Hotel AVA's marketing communications.

First in the framework of the thesis the concepts of social media and marketing communications are explained. The most important features of both concepts are presented based on already studied theories and material. The framework is followed by the empirical part of the thesis, which consists of a research based on a qualitative method; interviewing the customers at Hotel AVA with a semi-structured interview. The research method and implementation are described, after which the results are presented according to the data analysis. Finally, conclusion chapter summarizes the findings of the research making suggestions of development to Hotel AVA. Furthermore, the ob-

stacles met in the research process are described and proposal for further research presented.

## 1.2 Introduction of the company: Hotel AVA

Hotel AVA is a small independent hotel in Helsinki owned by AVA-Instituutin Säätiö (AVA Institute Foundation). It is situated in Vallila area, approximately 4 kilometres from the Helsinki city centre, and 1,5 kilometres from the Helsinki Exhibition & Convention Centre. The hotel has 55 rooms of which 15 are two and three room apartments and the rest are twin rooms. Many of the rooms have a small kitchen area. Average price (2012) of e.g. regular single room is 63€ (without kitchen area), studio twin room 83€ (with kitchen area) and two room apartment 125€ (price for four persons, apartment is with kitchen area). Reception is daily open 7.30-22.00, excluding Mid-summer and Christmas holidays when the hotel is closed.

Hotel AVA offers the following facilities to their guests: saunas, gym, common kitchen and self-service laundry room. It is also possible to arrange meetings in the classrooms of AVA-Instituutti (AVA Institute), which operates in the same building with the hotel. More informal meetings and events can be arranged at AVA-Klubi. The sauna and Saunakamari-lounge can be rented for private events for small groups.

AVA-Instituutin Säätiö and Hotel AVA were originally founded to accommodate the students of AVA-Instituutti. The students of the institute consist of the staff of Suomen Lähikauppa and its three different chains of daily consumer goods (Siwa, Välintatalo and Euromarket). Furthermore the hotel operation financially supports the training business of AVA-Instituutti. In 2000 it opened its doors to other guests as well and today the students' percentage of total occupation is only 2%.

Hotel AVA's customer base can be divided into weekday and weekend guests. This applies to both domestic and foreign customers. During weekdays (Monday-Thursday) most of the guests are business travellers, of which 65% are male and 35% female. The weekday guests are primarily Finnish. During weekends and summer months the guests are mainly domestic and foreign leisure travellers.

## 2 Social media

Social media is an online phenomenon that has become more and more popular within the past decade. It has been defined in many ways by different experts. A blogger and digital analyst Brian Solis has defined social media as the democratization of information that turns the audience from content readers into publishers, changing the one-to-many broadcasting model into many-to-many information sharing model that is based on conversations (Solis 2011, 21). Many authors define the words ‘social’ and ‘media’ first separately and then put the concept together, explaining that these terms are actually very familiar to people. By ‘social’ it is meant that a person has a natural tendency to connect with other people. ‘Media’ refers to mass media. When combining the natural need of connecting and sharing information among people and producing information and content, the concept of social media is created. (Juslén 2009, 115-116.)

Social media is based on online communities. This is why in this context the term ‘social’ can be explained by communities’ common efforts to create conversations and content online. ‘Media’ refers to all information that is easily reachable and set out to a great public. Consequently, when summing the concept of social media, it can be explained as a public site of useful and valuable information that is simple to reach and easy to contribute to. (Korpi 2010, 6-8.)

The ‘many-to-many’ model mentioned above is based on the concept of web 2.0, which became popular after the O'Reilly conference in 2004. The concept had been introduced already before that, but after the famous conference the expression “web 2.0” became popular everywhere, e.g. in the search engine results. The idea of web 2.0 is to let the users contribute and share, enabling a possibility for communication. Web 2.0 has replaced the old web 1.0 (WWW), which was more of an information source (one-to-many model). Web 2.0 has created also the basis for social media, with its accessibility for people to participate in sharing. (O'Reilly 2005.) For companies the most important aspect is that web 2.0 has enabled social media marketing, which started to rise in the United States in 2007-2008, and started to reach Finland in 2010 (Korpi 2010, 10).

Web 2.0 enabled also the concept of user generated content (UGC). User generated content refers to information online that can be published by anyone who uses social media and websites based on user generated content. This means publications such as messages contributed to discussion forums, blog posts, photos and videos as well as all sort of comments posted in social media channels. There have been some arguments about the reliability of user generated content, as anyone can contribute to it and potentially write also non valid information. (Rouse 2013.) However, there are also a lot of readers controlling the validity and authenticity of everything written in social media and all sites that are based on user generated content.

As there is a great variety of ways to access and contribute to the online conversation, social media can be divided into different categories in several ways. As an example, a social media marketing expert Susan Gunelius has made the division by a “four Cs” model: Content creation, content sharing, connections and community building (Gunelius 2011, 57-58).

Another division made by another social media marketing expert Jari Juslén is the categorization into three most important ones: Networking services, Content publication services and Information categorization & analysis. According to Juslén, all of the forms of social media are based on similar principles such as openness, participation to conversation, users creating the content and formation of communities (Juslén 2009, 117).

## **2.1 Social Networking**

Social networking sites are based on people’s desire to connect with friends or other people with similar interests. These networking sites can be divided into two main categories according to the reasons why and with whom they want to connect. First category is based on willingness to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances and sharing information about their lives online. The second category consists of services and sites that are based on a certain theme. A clearly defined theme is the reason for similar minded people to enter those sites. (Juslén 117-118.)

Social networking online is very much like networking in person. In social networking online the user creates a profile on a networking site and after that can start sharing content and sending connection requests to other users. One can choose the profile to be public to everyone or more of a private kind. (Gunelius 2011, 61.)

Two of the most famous social networking sites are Facebook and LinkedIn that are also the most important ones for business development (Gunelius 2011, 99). Yet another social networking application worth mentioning is Foursquare, which is based on sharing locations among friends. Moreover, especially for hospitality industry in Finland with high amount of Russian visitors (Tilastokeskus a., 2012; Tilastokeskus b., 2013), VKontakte is an important channel of social networking as it is very popularly and widely used in Russia and Eastern European countries (Medialatalo Toimelias Oy a., 2013).

### **Facebook**

Facebook has one billion monthly active users, of which approximately 81% outside of United States and Canada (October 2012). In September 2012 the amount of active daily users was 584 million. On September 30<sup>th</sup> 2012 the measured monthly active users on Facebook mobile products was 604 million. (Facebook a.) As these numbers also point to, Facebook is by far the most popular and used networking site also in Finland (Kortesuo 2010, 42).

On Facebook it is possible to create one's own profile, a page for a business or a group for people with similar interests. A profile is an individual's own space on the site. (Gunelius 2011, 100-102.) One can connect to others by sending friend requests to other users or accepting them from others. A Facebook profile also includes a space where users can leave comments to each other, post pictures and other sort of content. This space was originally called the wall, but it has changed during the years and is now called the timeline. On the timeline a user can view a log of Facebook activity and add a cover photo as well as highlight the most important activities and life events (Facebook b.).

Facebook page can be seen similar to a profile, but instead of being individual's own space, it is an official space of a business, organization or e.g. a celebrity. A Facebook page requires an administrator that can be e.g. a representative of a company. Similarly like on a profile, on a Facebook page one can upload pictures, videos and other kind of content as well as write comments. Facebook users, i.e. people with a Facebook profile, can "like" a Facebook page, e.g. of a company that they want to support. Each page has a like-button. It is also possible to invite other Facebook users to like a page. Facebook page administrators can access statistics of the page and send messages to all users who have liked the page (Gunelius 2011, 101). Another important factor for e.g. companies that are interested in visibility on Facebook is that when a Facebook user likes a page, the people on this particular user's friend list can see it in their news feed that shows current activities happening on Facebook. This might activate other users to like the same page as well.

Facebook group is a space that any user can create and it can be administrated by many people simultaneously. A group can be open for public or closed for a certain group of users. When the group is closed, a user needs a permission to join it. It is also possible to adjust the publicity of the content of the group; it can be public to all Facebook users or visible only for the users who belong to that certain group. (Gunelius 2011, 101-102.)

It is recommended for companies to create a Facebook page instead of a Facebook group. Getting the most use out of a group can be very difficult for a company, as the members, i.e. the Facebook users belonging to that group, should actively check the group's space for news. (Kortesuo 2010, 42.) Pages are public, which means that everyone can see the content already before becoming a fan of the page. Furthermore, due to being public, pages are also visible in search engines (Levy 2010, 61.) The pages' uploads are constantly updated on the likers news feeds and this way the user liking that page will automatically see the updates. It is expected that authentic information is published there, which is why only real and authentic representatives of companies should create Facebook pages. (Facebook c.) As an example, a hotel representative can create a Facebook page. The fans or regular customers of the hotel or a hotel chain

then again could create a Facebook group that would then be an unofficial platform for the fans to discuss. If a Facebook user notices a fake page that is not created by official representatives of a company or entity, one can click the “report”-button and this is how Facebook takes care of ensuring authentic content (Facebook c).

## **LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is another example of a social networking site. However, it quite strictly concentrates on a specific theme; work, careers and connections among professionals. The users can create a detailed resume online and connect with other people; by inviting them to their connections or get invitations themselves. The idea is to highlight one's own professional skills and special qualifications by filling out information and e.g. uploading PowerPoint presentations on the profile (Juslén 2009, 119). LinkedIn is available in 18 different languages, however, Finnish is not one of them (LinkedIn 2013). LinkedIn has 200 million users, of which 160 million are monthly active visitors. The site has users in more than 200 countries with 64% of users outside the United States (LinkedIn 2013). As the common goal of LinkedIn users is social networking for business purposes, the site is ideal for business to business marketing and marketing through relationship building. Even though the common belief is that Facebook is the best channel for business-to-customer marketing, each company needs to study their own possibilities in different channels. (Gunelius 2011, 111-112.)

## **Foursquare**

Foursquare is a free application and website for sharing locations among friends by “checking in” to venues, and getting suggestions of popular places and venues close by based on the user's current location. The Foursquare community consists of more than 30 million people around the world. (Foursquare a. 2013) It is a useful application for businesses to attract customers and engage them using their services again. Each venue on Foursquare can have a mayor; anyone who checks in to the place the most gets the title. Mayors are often given the possibility to claim special offers that other users cannot claim. This encourages the users to check in as often as possible to a same place and becoming the mayor.

Businesses can be listed on Foursquare by users who check in to them, or one can list their own company by themselves. After being listed, it is possible to claim one's own business and become the manager of it by providing contact information for verification. When managing the venue on Foursquare one can edit the listing information, see analytics of customers on Foursquare and create special offers for new customers or loyal customers and the mayor. (Foursquare d. 2013) A hotel could benefit of Foursquare and engage customers on the application e.g. by giving special offers of accommodation or restaurant services.

## **VKontakte**

VKontakte is a popular social networking site in Russia and Eastern European countries with more than a 100 million active users (Medialatalo Toimelias Oy a. 2013; VKontakte a. 2013). On their website (VKontakte b. 2013) VKontakte guides the user to get more information about them on Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia that is based on user generated content. According to Wikipedia (Wikipedia 2013) VKontakte is available in several languages but most of the users are Russian speakers and the site is the second most visited in Russia. On Wikipedia VKontakte is claimed to be similar to other social networking sites as it based on sending public and private messages, sharing content and creating groups and pages.

Maintaining social media accounts and pages in Russian requires a person who speaks the language. A Finnish company Medialatalo Toimelias Oy is specialized in social media marketing and search engine optimization in Russia (Medialatalo Toimelias Oy b. 2013). They offer different kind of paid services for companies, creating and maintaining accounts in social media in Russian. Medialatalo Toimelias can e.g. create a VKontakte group page for a company describing all the main features of the company's products and services in Russian, always adapting it to fit the company's marketing and commercial objectives and graphic appearance. (Medialatalo Toimelias Oy a. 2013.)

As Finland receives a lot of visitors from Russia all year round, VKontakte could be a beneficial platform of social media marketing for a hotel in Helsinki. Moreover, 20% of Hotel AVA's clientele consists of Russians guests (Laine, interview, 3.5.2013).

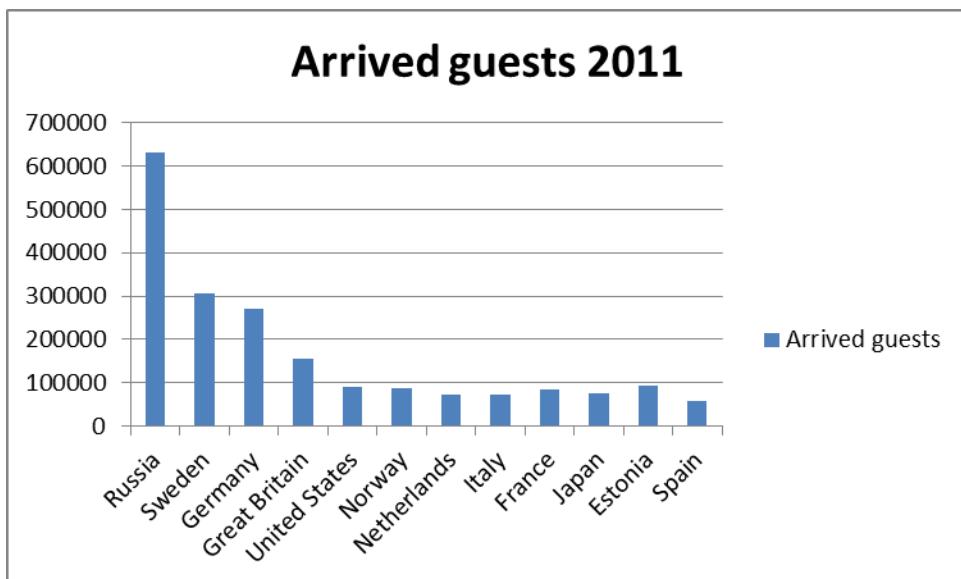


Figure 1. Arrived foreign guests to Finnish accommodation establishments by country of residence in 2011, including top 12 countries (Tilastokeskus a. 2012)

As demonstrated in Figure 1, most visitors of Finnish accommodation establishments in 2011 were Russians. Furthermore, Russia holds the first position also in overnights in Finnish hotels in 2011 (Tilastokeskus a. 2012). The same kind of pattern is visible also in the similar statistics of January–February 2013; most arrived guests in Finnish accommodation establishments and overnights in hotels were Russian (Tilastokeskus b. 2013).

## 2.2 Content creation & sharing

Susan Gunelius has analysed social media marketing tools and divides them into content creation, content sharing, connections and community building (Gunelius 2011, 58). Gunelius states (2011, 59) that “The cornerstone of any social media marketing strategy is creating amazing content”. There is a variety of these tools that one can use to create and share in social media in order to amaze and attract the audience. The most popular sites for video and photo sharing are YouTube and Flickr. Furthermore, another channel for creating amazing content is to write blog posts in e.g. Blogger or create updates on micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, which is also a popular platform not only for creating but sharing content.

Uploading photos and videos is a popular way for creating interesting content and sharing it. There are numerous sites and applications in the social Web for that purpose. One of the most famous video managing and sharing sites is YouTube with more than 800 million monthly users. 70% of the users come from outside the United States; from altogether 53 different countries and 61 different languages (YouTube 2013).

Flickr is an online application for storing, sharing and managing photos and videos. The idea is to make photos easily available for peers, who then can add comments and tags to them. (Flickr a., Flickr b.) A similar site to Flickr is Finnish Kuvat.fi. Furthermore, these photo applications and sites are also a good base for managing content (photos and videos) that can later be shared in e.g. social networking sites, blogs or micro-blogging sites. On top of that it is possible to join in groups within the sites in order to attract similar minded viewers and followers to one's profile.

Interesting content can also be created by writing blog posts and sharing them in different platforms of social media. Blogs are websites that are created and managed with applications designed for it. A blogger who writes the blog publishes article-like blog posts that the readers interested in the topic can then comment on (Gunelius 2011, 65-66.) A company blog can be administrated by one or more writers. A common blog of several writers is recommended for smaller companies that do not have many different departments. Furthermore, it is recommended that the blog is written with authentic employees' names instead of under one company name. This way it is more personal and interesting to the readers, who also more likely comment on the posts if the identity of the writer is visible instead of being hidden behind a company name. (Kortesuo 2010, 59.)

Jari Juslén (2009, 286-287) sums up the most important benefits of writing a company blog. He claims that it is crucial to demonstrate to the audience that the company is ready for conversation instead of only pushing product-oriented selling messages. The communication through blog is open and relaxed and builds trust. Furthermore, blog enables a constantly open channel for customer feedback and is easy to maintain.

Moreover, blog is an efficient way to improve search engine optimization and enhance the reachability of the content created online by the company. Each blog post or article is its own hit in search engine results, as each post has their own URL-address.

Micro-blogging is yet another form of creating and sharing content. It means writing updates of maximum 140 characters on micro-blogging sites, of which Twitter is by far the most famous one. The idea is to create interesting updates that are called tweets. One can also retweet other users' updates or share interesting links. (Gunelius 2011, 81-83.) Twitter has been more popular in English-speaking countries, but also in Finland the site has been gaining recognition (Kortesuo 2010, 43). There are currently about 200 million active users with 400 million tweets a day (Twitter a.) According to a study of Intellecta corporate (2013) there were 63 632 Finnish Twitter accounts in February 2013. These 63 632 mainly Finnish speaking users include only those that had written at least one tweet and was following or followed by at least one account identified as Finnish. Accounts with zero messages had been left out of that number.

In May 2013 Saska Saarikoski, a journalist of Helsingin Sanomat, claimed that Twitter is the fastest growing social media site in Finland. According to him, there are approximately 64 000 Finnish Twitter accounts, and half of them are used actively. Saarikoski states in his article that Twitter is mainly used for sharing news and opinions of current topics. He claims that previously journalists were the most active users on Twitter, but now the site is turning in to a mass media for everyone to share opinions and everyday updates and get the latest news. A recent study made by Europe's Public broadcasting companies' Eurovision-association states that 60% of users click a link more likely, if it is recommended by a person that they know. In the article Saarikoski also claims that social media as a source for news is growing its popularity; 43% of 16-24 year olds get their news from social media. (Saarikoski 2013, Helsingin Sanomat.)

Twitter (Twitter b., 2013) gives tips for businesses to engage their customers to become followers of their accounts. As an example, it is presented that the company should follow a weekly pattern of tweets; Monday promotions only for Twitter users, Tuesday behind-the-scenes exclusive photos or videos, Wednesday tips to followers

about your industry and so forth. It is also possible to download guides by Twitter in order to receive marketing tips for e.g. small businesses (Twitter c., 2013).

## **2.3 Forums and reviewing sites**

There is a variety of different types of forums and reviewing sites online. The most important and interesting ones to hotels are those of experiences related to traveling and accommodation. Not only do the reviewing sites offer a lot of useful information to a person planning a trip but also give a lot of useful information to hotels, as it is possible to follow what is said about the hotel, its competitors and the industry in general.

### **Discussion forums**

Discussion forums are websites or sections of a website in which visitors can create profiles and discuss with other users. Often the discussion forums are based on a certain topic, or the forum can be divided into several topics. The administrators of the site follow the conversation in order to keep it clean. (Eflaunt, 2013.) In Finland, a popular discussion forum site is e.g. Suomi24 (Suomi24, 2013), where there are many subsections in the forum of the site. The topics in which the forum has been divided are e.g. hobbies, society and travelling. The discussions often consist also of reviews of products and services, written by the site users.

### **TripAdvisor**

TripAdvisor is one of the world's largest travel websites. It mainly consists of more than 100 million reviews and photos of hotels, restaurants and tourist attractions. Furthermore, the site provides information of low airfares, offers free tourist guides and other useful tips for travellers. (TripAdvisor a., 2013.) The site is based on user generated content and social interaction, as the core idea is that the registered users share their travelling experiences and photos and write reviews based on their own experiences. Hoteliers can participate to the conversation as well, by answering to the feedback their company has received on TripAdvisor.

## **Booking.com**

Booking.com is a distribution channel for accommodation establishments and an online booking system for customers looking for accommodation. Approximately 425 000 room nights are daily reserved on Booking.com. Travelers booking accommodation through the site are from both business and leisure sector. Booking.com has a best price policy, meaning that the price they offer is always the lowest possible offered in all distribution channels. Booking.com offers accommodation possibilities in 181 countries and the site is available in more than 40 languages, including English, Russian and Finnish. (Booking.com a., 2013.)

Booking.com is not only a site offering a possibility to book a room, but also a form of social media with features of user generated content. Each accommodation establishment has its own page where customers who have stayed at the hotel can write reviews and rate different categories from cleanliness to the performance of the staff; the feedback request is sent to the customer after the stay at the hotel (Booking.com b., 2013). There is a lot of useful information for hoteliers to use; the score breakdown of different categories in numbers and on a graph, open feedback divided into positive and negative observations and the division into customer types e.g. families with young children, mature couples and solo travelers (Booking.com b., 2013).

### **3 Marketing communications in social media**

The core idea behind marketing communications is to share information to stakeholders about products and services offered by companies. Furthermore, with a great variety of products and services being offered, marketing communications help consumers to choose the right kind of products and services for them, making them understand and appreciate the value of the offered goods. (Fill 2009, preface.)

The ideas behind marketing and marketing communications have stayed the same, but the ways of implementation have changed with the phenomenon of social media coming along. Social media has brought up a lot of new marketing tools and platforms for marketers to use. Furthermore, social media has changed the aspect of marketing from product-oriented to customer-oriented view. (Juslén 2009, 72-73.) Marketing is needed not only to give information to consumers, but also to help the companies understand their customers. Creating the right kind of solutions for the consumer's problems helps the companies to gain high customer satisfaction. (Juslén 2009, 82.)

For decades marketing has been taught with different kinds of methods and models, e.g. the 4 P's (product, price, promotion, and place) or the 30 R-model (Gummesson's model of Relationship Marketing). These models, however, concentrate on the old-fashioned aspects where the core idea is for the company to talk and the audience to listen. The customer is targeted to be influenced by the fierce marketing and selling. However, this is the wrong way of approaching the customer in social media, where the communication is based on two-way interaction between the company and the customer. Furthermore, marketing and communications should be a part of managing businesses rather than just an expense of product-oriented selling. (Juslén 2009, 17.)

The change in marketing communications over the past years can also be explained and compared with the terms inbound and outbound marketing. Outbound marketing refers to old-fashioned interruption marketing; forcing the message by telemarketing, advertising and marketing through emails (Halligan 2010) as well as newspapers, TV, radio and billboards (Juslén 2009, 131). Inbound marketing then again has a newer ap-

proach. It concentrates on customers' willingness to receive marketing messages and their own activity to find solutions to their needs. The core idea in inbound marketing is for the marketer to make their company easily reachable online, so the customer can find more information about it when needed. Social media and search engine optimization are crucial tools in inbound marketing. In this new way of marketing the marketer's most important job is to be findable, get customer's attention at the right time and create useful content, instead of pushing marketing messages everywhere and to everyone. (Juslén 2009, 131-134.)

### **3.1 Defining the goals for marketing communications in social media**

The starting point for planning marketing communications should always be the question of why marketing communications is done, after which the goals should be specified (Karjaluoto 2010, 20-21). Goals are set in order to concretize the reasons for marketing actions. Well-set goals motivate the company to reach them as well as analyse the results in the end. In order to gain the best results, goals should be clearly set before entering social media. A good goal is reachable, measurable, time-bound, relevant and specific. (Korpi 2010, 73-74.)

Consequently, the right ways and channels for marketing communications need to be examined and chosen together with the agreed budget. In the end, the results are to be measured in order to analyse the success and to develop one-self. Often the importance of marketing communications is underestimated. The companies do not take enough time for planning it and result in ineffective marketing communications. A commonly used base for marketing communications seems to be the budget, which should not be a directional factor until later in the planning process. (Karjaluoto 2010, 20-21.)

Susan Gunelius has defined five most beneficial and common goals of social media marketing. According to her, these five goals consist of relationship building, brand building, publicity, promotions and market research. (Gunelius 2011, 15-16.)

Table 1. An abstract of Gunelius's five goals of social media marketing (Gunelius 2011, 15-16)

<b>Relationship building</b>	Inbound-marketing; engaged customers
<b>Brand building</b>	Increasing brand recognition and loyalty, word-of-mouth
<b>Publicity</b>	Sharing information and impacting on negative perceptions
<b>Promotions</b>	Reaching short-term goals, by e.g. discounts
<b>Market research</b>	Analysing the results with social media monitoring tools, learning of one's customers

As shown in Table 1, Gunelius's five goals of marketing are based on engaging the customers, utilizing the powerful effect of word-of-mouth, participating to the conversation by sharing and impacting on perceptions, reaching also short-term financial goals and finally analysing the results.

### 3.2 Rules for marketing in social media

As stated earlier in this thesis, social media consists of various channels and platforms. In all these channels and platforms of the social web there are unwritten rules to be followed in order to success in social media marketing (Gunelius 2011, 34). The core idea and one of the most impressive features of marketing online is for the companies to give up control as the customers produce marketing messages for them. Companies' and marketers' role is to follow the conversation and contribute to it by creating content and giving material for the audience to keep up the conversation. (Juslén 2009, 77.) Susan Gunelius has presented the idea of "The three Cs of social media marketing or failure" as in the following Table 2.

Table 2. The Three Cs of Social Media Marketing Success or Failure (Gunelius 2011, 34)

	Wrong (Failure)	Right (Success)
Conversation	Stop it.	Let it flow.
Content	Copyright-protect it, or put up a barrier to access it.	Share it.
Control	Hold it tightly.	Give it up.

As marketing in social media is based on interactive communication and transparency, the conversation of the social media audience should never be stopped, even when negative public discussion occurs. There are some examples of companies that have faced public negative feedback in social media but have not responded to it in the correct way; instead they have tried to stop the conversation by contacting the person who started it or alternatively not responded at all.

However, contacting e.g. bloggers or people sharing videos of bad brand image to a certain company, and asking them to remove harmful posts from social media can lead to even more negative image of the company than not answering at all. This sort of negative blog posts or other content published in social media should be given a transparent, honest and humble response by the company. (Gunelius 2011, 27-30; 49-50.) If a negative case is handled well, the company may receive positive acknowledgment of their reaction to the problem. It is important to give the response in the same forum or other platform where the negative comment has been written. The company should take whole responsibility and apologize to those who have been harmed by their actions. Furthermore, it is important to use language that is natural for communicating in social media. The audience should be assured that the problem will not happen again and explain how the situation is developing towards better. (Kortesuo 2010, 96-97.)

As mentioned earlier, marketer's most important task is to create interesting content and material online so that the audience and customers keep spreading the message in the social web. Juslén (2009, 75) states that it is crucial to concentrate on the customer and ensure that answers to his/her questions and problems can be found and reachable. Useful and interesting content published online will also help them find the company's products.

“Harvardin maineikas professori Theodore Levitt ilmaisi asiakasongelman merkityksen kertomalla usein opiskelijoilleen, miten asiakkaat eivät halua porakonetta, vaan he haluavat seinäänsä reiän.” (Juslén 2009, 73)

In this citation Juslén describes Professor Theodore Levitt's vision of the importance of the customer's problem; they do not want a power drill but a hole in their wall. It summarizes also the core idea of inbound marketing; the products and services, e.g. a power drill, should not be pushed to everyone's sight, but rather be found by those who need them. The company should concentrate on being there when needed and explaining the why their solution is the best one exactly to a certain customer's problem, and also being open to the conversation ensuring answers to customers' questions.

### **3.2.1 Customer service and feedback**

An essential question before starting marketing online is to think to whom the site, application or channel is targeted (Juslén 2009, 153). Social media is an effective channel for customer service for several reasons. Firstly, by answering to one customer online the company can serve other customers with similar problems as well, as the answer is visible to everyone. Also, in some social media platforms the customers can answer to each other's questions and create conversation. Furthermore, most of the social media applications are free. Social media enables an inexpensive and open channel for serving customers and solving their problems, rather than taking care of one customer at a time by phone or email. (Kortesuo 2010, 85.) There are, however, situations and questions that should be handled privately with the customer in question. (Kortesuo & Patjas 2011, 16, 21; Kortesuo 2010, 85). This sort of situations can refer

to those that concern e.g. private bookings, invoices or other personal questions. Kortesuo and Patjas (2011, 15) claim that it is best for a company to use their own employees for customer service in social media, as the customers expect direct interaction with the company whose products and services they are interested in.

### **3.2.2 Visibility online and monitoring the data**

A company can have their own website, create social media profiles and pages in several online communities and be a part of the online discussion in general. This all creates a base for visibility online as well as defines positioning in search engine results. Furthermore, an important and useful feature of social media marketing is monitoring the results and making use of all the data that can be found out from the social media channels and other sources of online activity. Studying the visibility online, user activity on the sites and other features can give a lot of useful information for companies as well as monitor the areas for improvement. An interesting thing to monitor is e.g. the number of visitors that come to the company's site, account or application. Crucial questions are how many visitors one gets e.g. every month, how the visitors end up on the site, how many inquiries do they present and how many new customers the company eventually gets through the web site or through search engine results. (Juslén 2009, 345-348.)

Some webmaster tools have been created in order to make it easier for companies to manage their business and marketing actions online. Two popular webmaster tools are Google AdWords and Google Analytics. Google AdWords is a keyword tool that is used for search engine advertising and gaining visibility. When using Google AdWords, the company basically creates an account, defines the range of visibility of the ad by countries and languages, specifies the keywords and texts of the ad, sets a maximum budget and publishes the ad (Juslén 2009, 247-251). The ads can be visible to those Google users that use the search words that are also defined as the ad's keywords, so the ad is visible to people already interested in the subject. The creation of an ad in Google AdWords is completely free of charge; the charges are based on a pay per click rule. It means that the company pays only of the times that a person actually clicks the ad that leads her/him to the defined site. The budget can be defined as a daily maxi-

mum budget and a maximum sum paid per click, meaning that the company has all the control. (Google a. 2013; Juslén 2009, 249-250.)

Google Analytics instead is a monitoring and analysing tool of websites' online activity. It is free of charge to use for anyone, whose website creates a maximum of 10 million hits per month. Google Analytics can create reports that help to analyse where do users come to a site and what do they do there, how could they be turned into customers, which keywords are the best to use on a site in order to receive more users and at which point does a user leave the site. All these features create a base for information about online traffic models and trends, and also help to define the importance between customer segments. Moreover, Google Analytics can also help in reporting and monitoring activities based on social media. For example, the service can help to discover how social media affects the defined goals, which social activities and networks engage most people and send most traffic to a company's site and how and where social media users are sharing content based on a company's website. For analysing more specifically actions and activity of a certain social media channel, it is recommended to use the channel's own analysing tools, as many social media platform have them, e.g. Facebook. However, the reports of Google Analytics can be used together with another site's analyses. (Google b. 2013.)

It is important for companies to follow the online conversation by subscribing to different sites and constantly staying up to date what is discussed of current issues as well as of the company in question. A useful tool for following the conversation about oneself, or e.g. of competitors, is Google Alerts. It is an online service where one can enter keywords and type of content to be followed. After subscribing, the user receives an alert by email whenever a new Google search hit is created based on the keyword and the type of content chosen. (Google c. 2013.) Useful keywords for staying up to date are e.g. the name of one's own company, the names of competitive companies, own products and services, the most used search words of the industry and the most important influence leaders in the industry (Kortesuo 2010, 90).

## **4 Research implementation**

This chapter discusses the empirical part of the thesis. The core idea was to find out features of Hotel AVA's customers' behaviour and interests in social media. This was done in order to suggest possibilities for the hotel's marketing communications in social media. At the beginning of the research process Hotel AVA does not have almost any kind of presence in social media; their marketing and communications are concentrated in other channels. Hotel AVA's customers' interests in social media have not been researched before and there are no statistics or previous information about it. Hence, a study was done based on a semi-structured interview as a research method, which enables receiving qualitative information about a subject that is not yet well-known.

### **4.1 Objectives**

The starting point of this thesis is that Hotel AVA has not implemented marketing communications in social media and does not have any accounts on social media sites or applications created by the hotel itself. A Facebook group for Hotel AVA that was created by the hotel manager a few years ago did not receive almost any publicity and is not found through Facebook search anymore. The hotel is mentioned on several booking and reviewing sites but all the content is created either by the booking site administration or the site users. However, feedback and ratings on some of these sites have been read and followed by the hotel manager of Hotel AVA, but the feedback has not been responded online.

As the hotel has not executed any marketing actions in social media, they have been concentrating on other marketing channels in order to reach their target groups' and potential customers' attention. The main target groups of Hotel AVA consist of exhibitors due to the vicinity of the Helsinki Exhibition & Convention Centre, small and medium sized companies for accommodation of their employees and families especially for the possibility of booking one big apartment for the whole family instead of many separate rooms. Furthermore, the visitors of different kind of events happening in Helsinki can be considered as a target group. However, when marketing Hotel AVA

as an option for accommodation during an event the capacity of the hotel needs to be taken into consideration; the hotel tends to have high occupancy rates very easily during big events.

Hotel AVA's current marketing channels consist of print media mainly in several occupational magazines and in some touristic publications, radio advertising in online radio as well as online advertising. The marketing actions online include Hotel AVA's own website and a monitoring tool for the traffic and functionality of the site, visibility on several search engines for contact information of companies as well as visibility in GPS devices. Furthermore, there are a few distribution channels in order to ensure a greater visibility for potential customers. The hotel's only distribution channel with features of social media and user generated content is Booking.com. (Laine, interview 3.5.2013.)

As Hotel AVA is not actively present in social media the objective of this research is to analyse the received data in order to create a base for a possible social media marketing plan. The aim is to discover key points of the hotel guests' interests in social media and find out categories of possible topics for creating interesting content for social media marketing communications.

#### **4.2 Method: Semi-structured interview**

The main research method used in this thesis is semi-structured interview. It is a qualitative method also known as focused interview. This method was chosen for the research because it gives qualitative information about a subject that has not been researched before and is unknown: Hotel AVA's customers' activity, interests and behaviour in social media. Semi-structured interview as a research method gives also an open possibility for different kind of answers; the method enables the opportunity for finding out something that the researcher might not have taken into consideration if specific answer options had been created (Puusa & Juuti 2011, 81). This is important as it is not known or researched whether Hotel AVA's customers are using social media at all or how they are using it. The results of the research could suggest in the end that the hotel should not use a lot of resources for marketing communications in social media,

if their guests do not seem to be interested in social media content at all. As not much is known about the subject, more defined questions or questions with answer options could lead the answers to a certain direction rather than discovering new and accurate information.

There are differing views of the character of semi-structured interview. According to some definitions, in semi-structured interview there is a set list of questions prepared beforehand, but the order in which questions are asked can vary. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006.) In the implementation of the interviews of this thesis the questions were planned and listed in advance, but the order of the questions was not always followed strictly and the wording of the questions varied. Semi-structured interview is suitable for situations where the questions are divided into themes and the interviewees' answers are wanted to fit to these topics, which is why the questions are clearly defined but not limited too strictly (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006).

As mentioned, the main method for gaining qualitative information by interviewing the hotel guests is semi-structured interview. However, the interview began with a few structured questions. The purpose of these questions was to find out some basic information of the interviewees such as age, nationality and purpose of the trip in order to understand profiles of the interviewees and prove diversity among them. In addition, basic questions of use of social media were asked as a basis for the following open questions that concerned different aspects of the topic. Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka (2006) suggest that questions of structured interview can be used in qualitative research for quantifying some results and also as additional material for the qualitative data. In this research these two methods have been combined in one interview rather than as two separate interviews inspired by one another.

### **4.3 Interview questions and procedure**

In this subchapter the process of the interview is introduced and explained. The interview consisted of two parts: in the first part there were more straightforward and structured questions with partly given options for basic information, and in the second part open and semi-structured questions for gaining qualitative information about Hotel

AVA's customers' behaviour and interests in social media (see Attachment 1). Test interviews were carried out twice in order to evaluate the understandability and clarity of the questions as well as to test the amount of time that will be spent on an interview. As a result of the test interviews the questions were slightly modified in order to make them more understandable and relevant.

The idea was to get basic information of the interviewee and create a profile for each of them, which also helps in analysing the data. In addition, the profiles help to prove the diversity among the interviewees as a part of Hotel AVA's clientele, which also consists of diverse groups of customers. The first part of the interview consisted of simple and mostly closed-ended questions. These were the questions of age, nationality and purpose of the trip (business / leisure). Furthermore, questions with answer options were used to find out whether the interviewee uses social media (yes / no), how often he/she uses social media (set options given) and which channels of social media they use (set options given). This was done in order to receive exact data for creating profiles and for enabling clearer comparisons.

The second part of the interview was based on open, semi-structured questions. The researcher followed the question list written and planned in advance, but as the research method was a semi-structured interview, at times the order in which questions were asked changed according to the conversation's flow. Furthermore, the wording of the questions was not always the same, but adaptive to the conversation keeping the themes of the interview in mind.

Each interview was executed in a small meeting room with a table and a few chairs. The room was chosen as it was a quiet space and enabled a calm atmosphere for the interview situation as well as quiet surroundings for recording the discussions. Furthermore, the purpose of a room with a door away from the lobby was to ensure a feeling of confidentiality to the interviewee. In the beginning of each interview the interviewee was explained that the researcher is carrying out the interview for research purposes as a part of a bachelor's thesis for her studies in HAAGA-HELIU University of Applied Sciences. Secondly, the theme of the interview was clarified to be concern-

ing social media and hotel's marketing communications. It was mentioned that the information collected with the interview is handled confidentially and used anonymously only for the research purposes in the thesis. Furthermore, the concept of social media was explained in order to ensure that each interviewee had similar description and understanding of the subject. Lastly, each interviewee was asked of their permission for recording the discussion, to which everyone gave their approval. The recording device had been tested three times before starting the interviewing. Average duration of an interview was in the end 5:51 minutes.

#### **4.4 Interviewees**

All interviewees were reached at Hotel AVA, during their stay at the hotel. The researcher looked for interviewees in the lobby of the hotel, asking the hotel guests to participate in an interview. The criteria of an interviewee were that he/she had to be at least 18 years old and a customer of Hotel AVA. The first reason for the age limit was that Hotel AVA does not accept guests under the age of 18 without an official permission of their guardian. Secondly, also based on that policy, children or young people of age less than 18 years old are not so likely to make their own hotel bookings. That is an excluding factor for them to be in the target group of the hotel's marketing communications. Furthermore, as mentioned, other criterion for an interviewee was that he/she is a guest of Hotel AVA. The criterion was set because the core idea was to study the social media behaviour of the customers' of this exact company. There were two accommodation gift cards drawn among the interviewees after all interviews were completed, so the age limit was taken into account when deciding the prize of the draw.

When the people were reached at the lobby they were explained that the interview takes about five minutes, it is for research purposes as a part of the researcher's bachelor's thesis and there is a possibility of winning an accommodation gift card provided by Hotel AVA. Most of the people passing by in the lobby were asked to participate, except of those who were talking on the phone, seemed to be clearly in a hurry or were already asked before and had given a negative answer. Those who had just checked in to the hotel and were going to their rooms were mostly asked to participate afterwards if they did not have the time right away. On the second day's morning the guests stay-

ing at the lobby consisted mainly of those checking out. If the person was already leaving the hotel after check-out they were not asked to participate in order to respect their personal time and the fact that they were already coming to the end of their guest experience. Furthermore, on both days a sign was placed in the lobby announcing the possibility of winning a gift card if participating to an interview. The receptionist's informed the researcher if a hotel guest had asked about the possibility to participate after having seen the sign. One had to be discrete and considerate when approaching the possible interviewees in order not to affect or disturb too much their stay at the hotel.

During the time spent at the hotel lobby 42 people were asked to participate in the interview. Altogether 17 interviews were done, meaning that 40% of the guests asked to be interviewed actually participated. Many of those who did not want to be interviewed mentioned as a reason that they were too tired after a work day, going to a meeting or were not interested in the hotel gift cards as a prize as their employer always pays for their accommodation. This might have affected the results in the aspect of the interviewees division between business and leisure travellers.

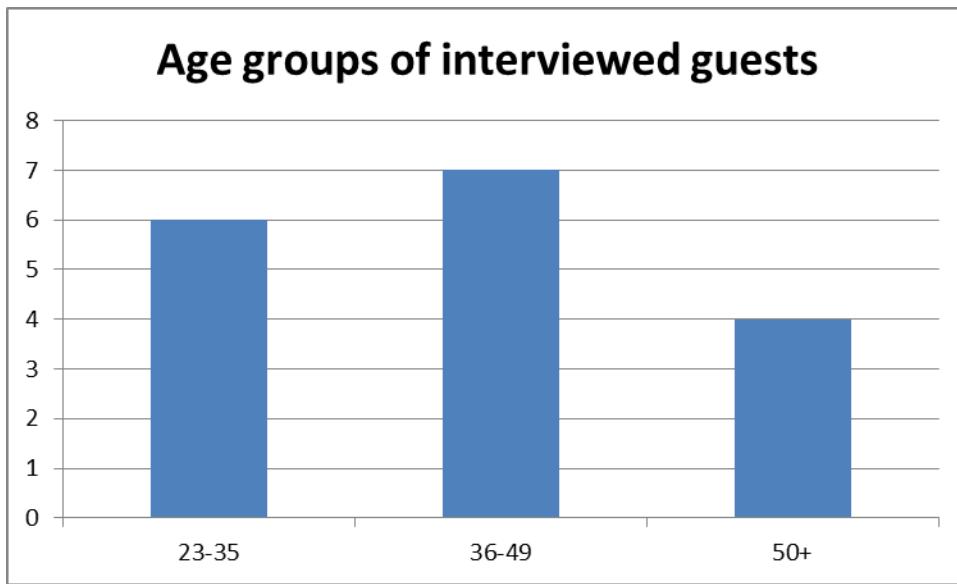


Figure 2. Division of age groups of the interviewed guests of Hotel AVA.

The division in age groups of the interviewed hotel guests is presented above in Figure 2. The interviewees were between 23 to 66 years old. Most of the interviewees were in

the age group between 36 to 49 years old. All interviewees were randomly picked and asked to participate to the interview from all the guests passing by in the lobby. No age group was preferred over another when searching for interviewees; the division between the groups as they are came about by chance and naturally.

#### **4.5 Time schedule**

The interviews were carried out during two days in a row, on a Friday and a Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2013. On the first day the researcher stayed at the hotel lobby and in the elevator lobby searching for interviewees as well as carrying out the actual interviews during the hours 14.45-19.30. On the second day this was done during the hours 8.30-15.15.

It was checked from the reception that guest turnover was high between the days of implementing the interviews, in order to meet as much new potential interviewees as possible. It is possible that an influential factor to the high guest turnover during the interview days were the first games of the world championships of ice hockey and different teams playing on those nights. As the interviews were carried out during the time of the ice hockey games the time period might also have influenced on the results of the research; the clientele of that weekend was quite sports-oriented and many of them staying at Hotel AVA due to the championship games. In addition, the nationality of the interviewees might have been influenced by the time period and hockey games according to the nationality of the teams playing. Moreover, as the interviews were carried out during a Friday and a Saturday, the time period might have influenced the division between leisure and business travellers.

## **5 Results**

In this chapter the results of the research are presented and analysed. First the process of data analysis is described. Furthermore, the results based on themes created in the analysing process are presented and explained. The presented themes consist of the most popular social media platforms used by the interviewees, reasons to use social media as well as defining the desired content on sites and applications.

### **5.1 Data analysis**

In this subchapter the process of data analysis is described and clarified. The data analysis of this thesis is based on creating themes and categories of the guests' perceptions and answers received by interviewing them.

Notes were written during and after the interviews. Moreover, all interviews were recorded. After the interviews were carried out and completed the recordings were transcribed as soon as possible so that the information was still new and the researcher had a fresh image and experience of the interviews. The transcriptions were written during two days in a row, starting the day after the interviews were finished. The duration of the interview recordings was altogether 1 hour 39 minutes and produced 30 pages of transcription with Calibri font size 11 and lining spacing of 1,15. The notes and transcriptions were studied several times by the researcher in order to familiarize one-self with the gathered material.

Both the notes written during the interview as well as the transcriptions were reduced in order to define and limit only the relevant data. After this the profiles of the interviewees were created to help the researcher analyse and arrange the collected data. The background information of each interviewee was entered into a table to each interviewee's own profile. The basic information consists of age, gender, nationality, purpose of the trip, whether the interviewee uses or does not use social media, how often they use social media, and which channels are used.

Firstly, it was found out that the interviewed hotel guests use social media quite frequently. The given options for frequency of use of social media were several times a day, once a day, several times a week, once a week, several times a month, a few times a month, once a month, less frequently and never.

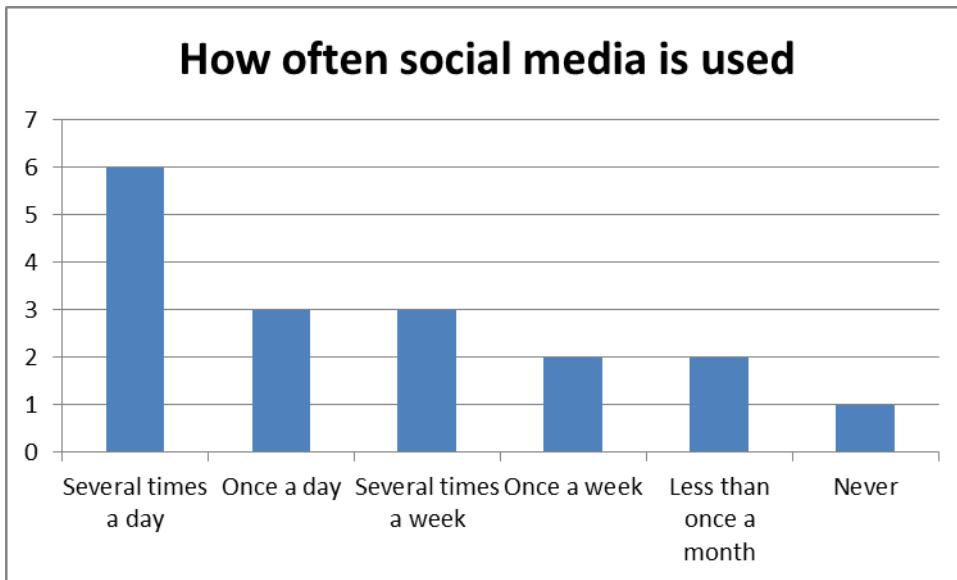


Figure 3. The frequency of Hotel AVA's guests using social media platforms.

In Figure 3 the frequency of the use of social media is presented. Most of the interviewees, meaning 35% of the interviewed hotel guests, use social media several times a day. Only one person, meaning 6% of the sample group, said that he/she never uses social media or forms of user generated content in any platforms. It can be summarized from the results that altogether 71% of the interviewed guests of Hotel AVA use social media somewhat frequently, from at least several times a week to several times a day. Hence, according to the numbers, hotel guests can be found and reached online in social media channels quite frequently also when considering marketing communications in the different channels.

## 5.2 The most popular platforms

As a part of the interview the interviewees were asked which sites and applications of social media they use. The given options for different social media channels were Foursquare, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, VKontakte, discussion forums, blogs, Book-

ing.com, Hotels.com, TripAdvisor, YouTube, Flickr and other. There was only one site that was mentioned during the interviews outside the given options; Google+ is used by two interviewees meaning 12% of the studied group. Foursquare and Flickr were not used by any of the respondents.

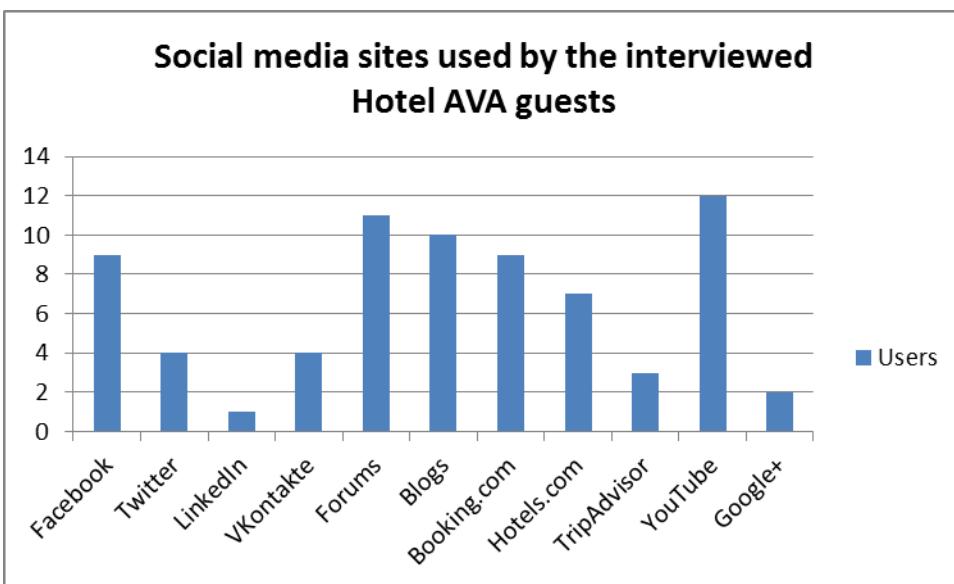


Figure 4. Social media sites used by the interviewed Hotel AVA guests

The division in popularity between different social media sites and applications is presented in Figure 4 above. As the nature of the research is more qualitative rather than quantitative and the sample size of hotel's clientele is 17 interviewees, the results cannot be generalized too extensively with a valid outcome. However, these results presented in the figure are based on the interviewees' answers and are directional to the hotel clientele's behaviour in social media. Moreover, the figure is informative about the social media platforms that are used by the interviewees and to which their answers about using social media are based.

As presented in the figure YouTube is the most popular social media site among the guests of Hotel AVA that were interviewed as it is used by 71% of the respondents. The percentage represent using all kind of activities on YouTube; it is not defined whether these YouTube users have an account on the site for uploading videos, making lists for subscriptions of YouTube channels or other activities for only logged in

users. The qualification of whether the site is used as a visitor or as a logged in user was not made, as the site can be widely used and videos seen also without a user name. Most of the interviewees who said to be using YouTube mentioned that they use it almost on a daily basis to see videos. These results suggest that when using social media in general, videos are interesting content to be followed when comparing to e.g. another content creation site Flickr, which had no users among the interviewees.

Another popular platform of social media is discussion forums; 65% of the interviewees mentioned to be following forums, either reading them, writing themselves or both. The most common topics of interest on sites like discussion forums was mentioned to be hobbies, travelling and reading or writing user experiences from products and services.

“- -No tyylä niinkun on ostamassa vaikka jotakin, niin katon, että onko mitä siitä laitteesta tai mitä muut siitä puhuu, niin se on oikeestaan pääasiassa sitä.”

[ - - Well something like you are for example buying something, so I check what is said about that device or what others are talking about it, so it's mainly that.]

As mentioned before, travelling was also stated to be an interesting topic on discussion forums. It was mentioned to be interesting to read other people's experiences of a country, city, tourist attraction or a hotel. Moreover, in addition to reading about other's experiences, some interviewees mentioned to be eager to write about their own experiences as well.

Blogs are followed by many of the interviewees. Altogether 59% of the respondents said to be reading blogs. One of the interviewees also mentioned to have written a travel blog himself in the past, which included writing and posting pictures about his journeys. In general the interviewees who mentioned to read or have read travel related blogs said that it is most interesting to read other's experiences before one's own trip.

In the number of interviewees using Booking.com and Hotels.com are included only those who use also the reviewing options and features of the sites based on user gener-

ated content. Booking.com is used by 53% of the respondents and the site received positive comments and seemed to be very much appreciated.

“It’s my favorite site for booking accommodation. - - generally I find all the information on Booking.com”

“- - Bookingissa mistä mä oon tykänyt, koska siellä on sitten nää arvostelut; nuoret parit, ja iäkkäämmät, niin ihan sillä perusteella oon siellä sit varannut, että kattoo nyt sopivasti ettei se [hotelli] oo minkään diskon yläpuolella. Erittäin hyvät [sivut], että mä oon tykänyt niitä käyttää.”

[ - On Booking what I’ve liked, because then there are these reviews; young couples, and elderly, so based on this I’ve then booked there, just looking conveniently so that it [the hotel] is not above some disco. Very good [site], so I’ve liked to use it.]

As mentioned also in the comment above, the reviewing section on booking sites based on other user’s experiences are highly valued, especially due to the division of the reviewers into categories based on their age, with whom they are travelling and other attributes. Hotels.com is used by 41% of the respondents, so it is not as highly used as Booking.com. This was visible also in the discussions; Booking.com was clearly more often mentioned as a channel to find hotels. Also further in the discussion when the given options of social media channels were not brought up by the researcher, the interviewees mentioned Booking.com as a platform and search engine to start looking for accommodation, whereas Hotels.com was mentioned only a couple of times.

Facebook can be seen as a popular social networking channel among the interviewees with 53% of them using the site. Furthermore, the interviewees seemed to link the word Facebook very clearly to the concept of social media. Before the interview started and the researcher asked whether the interviewee was familiar with the term social media, many of the interviewees instantly connected the term to mean “sites like Facebook”. After this the researcher explained the definition of social media, assuring the same exact definition to each interviewee. Most of the hotel guests interviewed mentioned Facebook to be mainly a communication channel with friends and acquaintances, or just using the site “because everyone is there”. However, some interviewees an-

nounced clearly that they have decided to stay out of Facebook and avoid also similar sites to Facebook; they did not like the idea of “liking” or following other people’s or companies’ activities. On the other hand, some of the interviewees appreciated the following and sharing possibilities of Facebook to a great extent, so there was a clear division in the opinions and reasons to use Facebook.

Twitter and VKontakte are both used by 24% of the respondents, TripAdvisor by 18% of them, Google+ by 12% of the interviewees and LinkedIn only by 6% of the sample group, meaning one person of the interviewed. Those who mentioned to be using Twitter said it to be on a daily basis, even many times a day. VKontakte is used by all the Russians who participated to the interview, for some as a replacement of Facebook and to some in addition to using Facebook. All the Russians who were interviewed mentioned VKontakte to be “the Facebook of Russia”. Furthermore, when asking them whether they are using Facebook, some answered agreeing but specifying “the Russian one”, referring to VKontakte. Those of the respondents who said to be using TripAdvisor specified that they go on the site quite rarely. LinkedIn was used only for professional purposes. Google+ was mentioned be the main sharing platform for one of the respondents but the other interviewee who mentioned using it said that the user account exists but no time is spent on the site.

When asking the interviewees about how they had made the reservation to Hotel AVA and through which channel, Booking.com was mentioned most frequently. The most common way for finding the hotel was through Google search, with search words such as “hotellit [hotels] Helsinki”, “hotelliuhone [hotel room] Helsinki” and “hotels Helsinki”. Booking.com seems to appear first in the search results when using these mentioned search words or words of similar kind. For those who made the reservation through some other way than Google search or Booking.com, the most common way was making the reservation on the phone. Most of the guests who had made the reservation on the phone had been to the hotel in the past or at least had already known about the hotel before. Four persons mentioned that the hotel was suggested to him/her by a friend.

In general among the interviewees, Google search is the most popular way to start searching for accommodation or information about it. Moreover, searching straight on Booking.com or ending up to Booking.com from Google's search results is also common way in the beginning of reservation process. Other mentioned channels for searching information about accommodation possibilities are travel agent websites, websites of Finnish regions and towns, straight on a hotel's own website or when searching offline; through number and contact center services by phone. Those of the respondents who mentioned to be travelling a lot for their work and staying tens and hundreds of nights at hotels per year said that they tend to use the same hotels or hotel chains and book straight from their website. This means that they do not perform any searches online or offline as business customers, but according to the respondents, might search for new options of different hotels when travelling for leisure purposes.

### **5.3 Reasons to use social media**

For discovering why the interviewed hotel guests are using social media, such questions were asked as what kind of content is interesting to them and what could make them start following a page in social media. These questions lead to discussion of what the interviewees like to do on social media and why do they use the sites and applications of social media.

#### **Communication**

The most frequently mentioned reason for using social media in general is to keep in touch and communicate with friends and acquaintances. The channels are often chosen accordingly to those channels that friends are using; some interviewees even mentioned to spend more time on a certain site, but having an account on another site as well only to communicate with those friends who are not on the site they use more actively. Also following some event pages on e.g. Facebook was seen as an important part of the communication; seeing the guest list of people participating to the event and then discussing the event with the peers who are participating. The styles of communication that were brought up during the interviews vary from private inbox messages to discussions held publically e.g. on a friend's Facebook timeline.

## Sharing and receiving content

Another reason mentioned for using social media was to share and receive interesting content. Social media sites are seen as an important channel to share links and e.g. to suggest products and services that were perceived as a positive experience. The line between communication and sharing cannot always be too strictly defined as these two categories seem often go together. It can be said that friends' updates on a user's social media accounts are important and interesting content that is shared to a lot of users by the person who created the update, and it often leads to exchanging messages and communication about the subject. Furthermore, sharing and receiving links to other interesting sites are perceived as an important reason to use a site or application of social media. The most frequently mentioned links that were found interesting were those of blogs. Other than concrete links to other sites, sharing of information and experiences was seen important and the opinions were perceived to be trustworthy.

“Mut sanotaan et vapaa-ajan hotellit... - - niin kyl mä niinkun aina käytän sosiaalista mediaa. Se on oikeastaan ehkä luotettavin. Tietysti tavalla se herättää luottamusta jos mietti vaikka Facebookia, että sulla on siellä ne sun ystävät ja tuttavat niin kyllä sieltä saa sellasta, et 'hei oon lähössä sinne, onko joitain suosituksia mihin voi mennä', ja muuta...”

[But let's say that hotels for leisure travelling... - - I do always use social media. It's probably the most reliable one. In some way it inspires trust if you think for example Facebook, that you have there your friends and acquaintances so you can get something like, 'hey I'm going there, do you have some recommendations where to go', and so on...]

The interviewee's comment mentioned above is an example of sharing and communication at the same time; the aspect of sharing is emphasized as the question for recommendations and sharing of opinions is done publically. This way the public communication may be interesting and beneficial to others as well than just the ones actively participating to the conversation. Hence, the communication and especially open information sharing work in a very public form of word-of-mouth.

## **Staying up to date**

Based on the interviews it was brought up that staying up to date with current events and happenings in general are an important reason for using social media. Some of the interviewees mentioned to have taken a passive role in social media; they have user accounts on different sites and applications but they do not actively create updates themselves. However, following what others are saying was found to be important and interesting in order to stay up to date and get to know about the latest news and happenings, also by the more passive users. It can be seen in the results that the elder respondents found social media platforms a useful place for looking for information and following the flowing conversation online, whereas the younger respondents were more active in participating to also share the news and participating to the conversation rather than just following it.

### **5.4 Desired content in social media**

As discussed in the framework in the beginning of this thesis, creating interesting content is the most important thing in social media marketing. Based on the results of the interviews carried out for the research, the most common answer when asking about what makes the person follow a page in social media, was interesting and addictive content.

“I wouldn’t follow something just because of good marketing. It would 200% be the content of my interests. So I’m getting enough spam so I don’t need to increase that.”

“Ehkä se on se koukuttavuus just, et sä rupeet kattoo jonkun jutun. Sit alat seuraamaan sitä, niin sit sä oot ihan koukussa siihen. - - ehkä se on se uteliaisuus tai tiedonjano, tai tämmönen vaan... Onhan se eräänlaista viihdettä. - - ehkä se [koukuttava tekijä] on se viihteellisyys, sanotaan niin, ja tieto.”

[Maybe it is the addictiveness, like you start checking out something. Then you start following it, so you’re like totally addicted to it. - - maybe it is the curiosity or thirst for information, or something like this... It is some kind of entertainment. - - Maybe it [the addictive factor] is the entertainment, let’s say that, and information.]

In these two examples taken from the transcription material there are two different perceptions of interesting content in social media. The first quotation represents the idea of following only something truly interesting and useful to the social media user from a personal point of view. The second quotation is more open to curiosity and to the possibility that almost any page or company can be followed and interesting when the content is entertaining and addictive enough. It was also mentioned in a couple of discussions with the interviewees, that a company, e.g. a hotel, that could create that interesting and addictive content would probably stay in consumers' minds when needing a hotel room next time.

These quotations from the interviewed hotel guests support the core idea of inbound marketing; the company's task is to be easy to find and pull potential customers' attention towards them when the customer wants to find a solution to his/her problem. If the company can give a solution to the customer's problem by offering its products and services, the job is to find a way to announce that "the solution is here when you need it". Most importantly, it needs to be ensured that the customer really finds the company and their offered solutions, regardless of whether the appealing factor is decided to be based on entertainment or possibly a more practical aspect of personal needs and interests. With interesting content it is possible to make a person become addictive of one's updates or social media page. However, pushing too hard the selling message at a wrong time can disturb the person and make him/her perceive the message as spam, which is why the company should be considerate towards the customer especially in marketing communications in social media.

It was found out that the base for interesting, good and valid social media content for a hotel is a site or a page that is clear and easy to use. Moreover, most importantly the basic information of the hotel should be presented explicitly on the site, including a valid, up-to-date and clear package of information. Based on the research, it can be said that the basic information should consist of honest and reliable facts and description of the hotel. The description should include at least information of the location, rating and level of the hotel in general, prices and target groups especially informing whether the hotel is suitable for children, and services of the hotel. Many of the inter-

viewed guests were also interested in the possibility to check availability on social media pages, with a clear and simple user interface for it. Information about special vacations as well as about the opening hours during bank holidays were seen as important information that could be updated in social media channels. These were perceived as interesting content especially if following a hotel in social media and receiving updates from the hotel page. Especially the hotel guests, who said to be travelling a lot for work regardless of the time of the year or holidays, mentioned this kind of information to be important. In addition, pictures are valued a lot as basic features of a social media page.

Furthermore, after the base of a clear and informative social media page has been designed and built, interesting content should be updated in order to attract social media users to become followers and in general more aware of the page. Based on the research and interviews carried out, interesting content to possible Hotel AVA's followers in social media would be updating current happenings and events. By this it is meant happenings and events of the hotel as well as those of close-by areas. As an example, it was suggested by some of the interviewees that it would be interesting to get real time updates by the hotel about e.g. theatre shows nearby. The interviewees who suggested this thought that when they come from somewhere else than Helsinki, it is quite difficult to find all the close-by restaurants, venues, events and happenings that could be visited during their stay at Hotel AVA. The guests thought that the hotel could be the best informer of the presented happenings, and it would be interesting to follow on e.g. social media pages because it would also be useful information for the user.

The interviewees were also asked, what makes them like or follow a page in social media in general and specifically about hotels. The discussions with each interviewee varied a lot from each other; some of the interviewed hotel guests said that they do not follow any pages and cannot think of any kind of features that would make them follow or like a page in social media. On the other hand, some guests said they find it very useful to follow social media pages and accounts, as they can easily stay up to date with

the subjects they are interested in. Essentially, again interesting content was mentioned to be a reason for following or liking a social media page.

The most often mentioned factor for making a person follow a page was discounts and special offers. Some interviewees mentioned discounts in general, but it was also brought up that special offers for e.g. only Facebook followers would be interesting. It was said that this kind of offers would give a reason for liking a page on e.g. Facebook. However, according to the interviews, offers of this kind would also create a feeling of significance and specialty to a person making a booking through such an offer that is special and reachable only among a certain group. It can also be seen in the results that a feeling of personality is seen important when starting to follow or like a social media page or account. According to the discussions with the interviewees, the feeling of personality can be reached e.g. through creating marketing messages or updates in social media to a specific group of possible hotel guests, and these groups could vary from time to time. As an example, it was suggested that those who stay a lot away from home due to work, and spend a lot of time in hotels, could be attracted with a specialty designed taking them into consideration and making them receive a special experience. Another specialty that was suggested to draw attention positively towards a hotel's page in social media was said to be something designed especially for woman travelers.

Moreover, according to the results, other interesting subjects that could be followed also in social media on a hotel's page would be well-being, comfort, humor and easy-goingness, "things that make you smile". Almost all of the interviewees mentioned several times the importance of previous guests' experiences of the hotel. In addition, it was also mentioned by some of the guests that a crucial condition for liking or following a hotel in social media is that one has visited it first and liked the place in real life. Those hotel guests who said that they would not follow a hotel in social media mentioned as a reason that they do not follow any pages in general either, or want to avoid spamming messages in their Facebook news feed. Another reason that was mentioned by a couple of guests was that following a page would not fit to their policy of travelling; they do not want to visit the same place twice.

As a conclusion, in the end it can be seen from the results that most people of the group of interviewees had a positive attitude towards the possibilities and consequences of following a hotel in social media, even though some were afraid of increasing spamming and commercial messages. However, it was mentioned several times during the discussions that people want to find what they are looking for online and in social media, so it should be assured that the possibility to find and follow a page exists when the person needs to and wants to find it.

## **6 Conclusions**

In this final chapter the conclusions are presented based on the results of the empirical research, also respecting the theories of the framework of the thesis. First, the engagement of Hotel AVA's guests in social media is discussed, after which some recommendations are suggested for the company's future actions. Furthermore, critique of the research as well as of the whole thesis process is presented and discussed. In addition, proposals for further research are suggested in the final sub chapter.

### **6.1 Hotel AVA's guests' engagement in social media**

Hotel AVA's guests are engaged in social media, even though on different levels of activity. However, online activities based on user generated content and social media are used and seen as an important part of finding accommodation solutions. In general, the interviewed hotel guests are active in using social media and to many it is an important part of everyday life. It is mainly used for communication with friends and acquaintances, staying up to date with news and topics of personal interest and sharing and receiving interesting information such as reviews and recommendations.

The interviewed group of Hotel AVA's customers are interested to stay up to date online about current topics and news and highly appreciate friends' and acquaintances' opinions and recommendations about products and services. It can also be said that not only friends' recommendations are valued but also other users' recommendations in general; it is seen as more reliable, realistic and authentic marketing message when coming from other consumers rather than only from the company itself. All things considered, based on the results, information and content in social media is seen trustworthy as often the source of information is one's friends or friends of a friend. It can be said that people enjoy sharing links and information when they have experienced something positive themselves. Clear user interfaces that are easy to use are highly valued. Interesting content is the most crucial thing in the decision whether to follow a page in social media; it consists of feeling of personality, up to date topics and news, easy-going, relaxed and entertaining conversation and a clear base of basic information of the company, e.g. a hotel.

## **6.2 Recommendations for Hotel AVA**

Even though the results cannot be generalized too extensively, they are directional to give information about Hotel AVA's customers' behaviour in social media. The sample group that was interviewed and studied for the thesis might have been small compared to the capacity of the hotel. However, the range of interviewees varied from younger to elder respondents and from less to more active users of social media, comprising a realistic group to study. All in all, the results suggest that the hotel guests are spending time in social media and appreciate the online conversation and recommendations also concerning hotels. The guests are interested to stay up to date with different kind of topics and news, and travelling is seen as a fascinating subject; the interviewees are interested to read about it in social media. This is why Hotel AVA should create a social media marketing plan in order to be able to participate in current and actual conversation and also gain a better position considering inbound marketing.

Hotel AVA is already on Booking.com and the results prove the site to be a popular channel. Booking.com is seen as a trustworthy and well working site for booking accommodation but also when looking for information about a hotel. Hotel AVA could execute some actions for improving the image and visibility on Booking.com; regularly checking that all the information is correct and up to date, consider whether the capacity on Booking.com should and could be increased especially during more quiet periods, and assuring that all the reviews written by hotel guests are monitored. The reviews written by guests who have already been to the hotel are considered important by those who might become customers in the future, and are an influencing factor when choosing a hotel. Based on the results of the research, Booking.com is an important channel for reading recommendations about hotels, including Hotel AVA, so giving as realistic image as possible of the place on the site is crucial. Furthermore, monitoring the feedback written also in other reviewing sites of social media is important. Responding to the feedback is a great way to participate in the conversation, when giving an honest and transparent answer. It serves many people at once and help to create a trustworthy image of the hotel.

Based on the results, interesting content for Hotel AVA to publish would be first of all creating a social media page with relevant basic information with pictures. The basic information should include facts consisting of e.g. location, price and facilities, how to reach the hotel as well as distances from city centre, train station and other places that are relevant to a traveller coming to the hotel. Pictures should be uploaded and updated regularly. Also information and description of what is in the nearby area is important; this could be presented in the section of basic information but also updates of current events could be created on a regular basis, so that the page followers can rely on finding the relevant information and news on the hotel page and possibly getting it to their news feed as well. Updates, or even its own section on the page, could be created considering availability. According to the interviewees, it would also be important to inform the audience about special holidays when the hotel is closed, or on the other hand, if the hotel is open during a holiday season when many other accommodation establishments are closed. Special offers could be created during e.g. low seasons in order to meet short term goals. The offers could be directed e.g. to a certain group or a certain site's users. Furthermore, it was found out in the research that videos are seen as interesting content, and YouTube is a popular site followed on a daily basis, so visibility there could be beneficial for the hotel. Hotel AVA could create videos introducing the hotel and share them in social media channels. Moreover, the customers could be encouraged to share their own content about Hotel AVA in social media, e.g. by creating a competition based on shooting videos or taking pictures of their stay at the hotel. Information about the existing social media pages and accounts should be shared to the guests in order to make them visit the sites and possibly become followers.

As the interviewed hotel guests are that actively using social media and also interested in topics like traveling and hotels, it can be suggested that Hotel AVA should create a social media marketing plan. Based on this research, Facebook and Twitter could be the sites to start from as they are also the leading sites in Finland in their categories and are growing bigger all the time. The hotel would benefit from creating a social media plan, as it helps in reaching the set goals. Participating in the online conversation and using social media in marketing communications would make Hotel AVA more visible

in search engine results as well as would give a possibility for online word-of-mouth that can reach a lot of people with relatively little effort and small budget. Social media marketing could help a small independent hotel like Hotel AVA become easier to discover in the aspect of inbound marketing. Creating interesting content, staying up to date and being present in social media discussion could help the hotel to reach goals such as finding new potential customers, engaging the already existing ones and increasing sales.

### **6.3 Criticism and obstacles met during the process**

For more accurate and valid results more people should have been interviewed. Even though the core idea was to receive mainly qualitative data about an unknown subject, the sample group under study could have been bigger, and more useful qualitative data could have been received. Furthermore, the interviews could have been divided to be carried out during a wider period of time; this way the possible influence of the ice hockey championships could have been smaller. Moreover, with a more extensive period of time it could have been possible to reach a wider range of different types of customers. However, as mentioned earlier; the results are directional and in the end give a lot of information and suggestions that could be specified further in another type of research.

When trying to reach interviewees in the hotel lobby, it was noted to be quite a difficult task due to the fact that not a lot of people spend a lot of time there. Most of the situations when asking a hotel guest for the interview were based on interrupting the guest from what they were doing; checking in or out, going out to a meeting or an agreed appointment, going to breakfast, taking bags to the room and so forth. This is also a possible reason for negative answers to participate to the interview. The duration of the interview had to be kept short enough in order to find people who have time to participate in it. At times when mentioning the interview to last approximately five minutes, it still was too time consuming to some guests. However, minimum time was used and for wider and more informative results more time should have been used for each interview.

## **6.4 Proposal for further research**

Based on my research, the researched topic could be brought further and specified by creating an actual a social media marketing plan for Hotel AVA, e.g. as a product oriented thesis. This requires, though, that not too much time has passed after the implementation of this thesis process, so that the findings of this thesis can still be seen as valid data.

As social media has become popular all over the world and has affected marketing in various ways, it might be simple to say that everyone should be in social media, whether the question is of an individual person or a company. However, it is more complicated to prove the facts and reasons for why someone should be in social media. Even though the results of this thesis suggest that a social media marketing plan should be created for Hotel AVA, more quantitative and more specific qualitative data could be still collected. Further research could be done more exactly concentrating on certain platforms of social media, as the research done in this thesis is an overview of the hotel customers' behaviour in social media channels in general. However, this research is directional to inform which channels should be concentrated on and also proves that time and effort should be given to create the social media marketing plan. In order to find the most beneficial ways for implementing marketing communications in social media, the traffic hours of social media sites could be discovered for reaching as wide audience as possible with updates and other content that is published.

Many hotels and accommodation establishments are already in social media. However, when navigating online on different social media pages, it can be seen that not enough time and effort is always spent for planning the marketing communications. The participation to the real time discussion and presence should be more regular and more specific goals should be set. The findings of this thesis are an advisable base for Hotel AVA to start creating a social media marketing plan, and reaching their goals with well-planned participation in the online discussion.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix 1. The form of base questions for an interview with the hotel guests.

Date:

Interviewee nro:

Gender:

Age:\_\_\_\_\_

Nationality:\_\_\_\_\_

Purpose of the trip:

Business\_\_\_\_ Leisure\_\_\_\_

Do you use social media?

Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

How often on average do you use social media?

Several times a day\_\_\_\_ Once a day\_\_\_\_ Several times a week\_\_\_\_ Once a week\_\_\_\_ A few times a month\_\_\_\_ Once a month\_\_\_\_ Less frequently\_\_\_\_  
Never\_\_\_\_

Which of the following applications and sites do you use?

Foursquare\_\_\_\_ Facebook\_\_\_\_ Twitter\_\_\_\_ LinkedIn\_\_\_\_ VKontakte\_\_\_\_

Discussion forums\_\_\_\_ Blogs (as a reader)\_\_\_\_ Booking.com\_\_\_\_ Hotels.com\_\_\_\_

TripAdvisor\_\_\_\_ YouTube\_\_\_\_ Flickr\_\_\_\_

Other\_\_\_\_\_

1. How did you end up choosing Hotel AVA?
2. Do you use internet or social media for searching a hotel or information about it? How?
3. What kind of things and content interest you in general in social media?
4. What kind of content about hotels interests you in social media?
5. What makes you like or follow a page in social media?
6. What makes you like or follow a hotel in social media?